

## **A Research Roadmap by Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse**

### **What's a "primary source" and why would I want to find one?**

So many participants in National History Day get hooked on history because history becomes real to them. How does this happen? The key to making exciting discoveries about the past is interacting with primary sources.

What's the difference between a primary source and a secondary source when you're doing historical research? Sometimes this can be a complicated question, but here are some general written by an author who is not an eyewitness or a participant in the historical event or period. For example, high school history textbooks and other history books about a particular topic are secondary sources. So are biographies and reference books, such as encyclopedias. The most basic definition of a primary source is: material written or produced in the time period students are investigating. A letter written by President Lincoln in 1862 is a primary source for a student researching the Civil War era. The memories of a person who was part of Cesar Chavez's labor union movement also can serve as a primary source, even if you conduct an oral history interview with the person in 2001. He or she was an eyewitness to and a participant in this historical event at the time.

Like professional historians, History Day students must ask questions about their topic's significance in history, and they must creatively interpret primary sources in order to answer questions about their research topics. As you participate in National History Day you will be defining, identifying, getting your hands on, and interpreting primary sources, as well as doing background research in secondary sources. As you do this, you are making history! We have created this roadmap to give you some ideas of the logistics involved and to help you start stretching your brain for the marathon ahead.

Now, to get started on your research. . . .

### **1. Secondary sources give you background and lead you to the primary sources.**

It's important to start your research journey by looking at some secondary sources. This will help you understand how to place your topic in the larger historical context. History books and other reference materials help you understand why your topic is important and how it relates to economic, social and political developments of the period. **A good National History Day project draws on several kinds of secondary sources, in addition to your own original interpretation of primary sources.** Look at monographs as well as general reference books to get background on your topic. You will discover that professional historians bring their own biases to the topics they research, and you should seek more than one perspective on the issues you are researching.

#### Reference Books

Look for general information in: encyclopedias, special historical dictionaries, and historical atlases. General encyclopedias such as *World Book* can provide you with basic information, while subject encyclopedias such as the *Encyclopedia of the North American Colonies* or the *Encyclopedia of American Economic History* provide a bit more detailed information. Encyclopedia articles often have bibliographies which can direct you to some of the major secondary sources for a topic.

#### Popular Periodical Literature

Popular magazines, indexed in the *Readers= Guide to Periodical Literature*, can give you ideas for and some general information about particular topics. *National Geographic* provides general information on provocative topics. Many other magazines and newspapers publish articles dealing with individuals or historical issues. For example, in the mid-1990s many U.S. newspapers and magazines wrote about Nelson Mandela, whose political activism helped revolutionize South African society by ending apartheid, and who became president of South Africa in 1994 after spending 28 years in prison for his politics. Starting a project on apartheid, you might begin here, and get ideas for interesting topics about the events that led to this revolution.

#### History Textbooks

Yes, really! Your textbook can be a great place to get ideas for topics and find out about the general context of your topic. If you're interested in the invention of the telescope as it revolutionized astronomy, first do some background reading on the scientific revolution as a whole, perhaps in a general textbook on European history. This will help you understand how your topic fits in with the big picture.

#### General Historical Works and Monographs

Move from the general to the specific. A book on the history of astronomy will provide more detail than a general text on European history. Try a keyword search at a larger library and you'll find dozens, if not hundreds, of books on the history of astronomy and related sciences. Another way to find secondary sources on your topic is to check the notes and bibliographies of books you've already found. And sometimes you might be able to find an entire book which is a bibliography on your topic; these books will be in the reference section, especially at university libraries. A good guide to the best books in just about any area of history is *The American Historical Association's Guide to Historical Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

#### Journal Articles

Historians don't always write books. Smaller essays on specific topics can be found in scholarly journals. These are periodicals similar to magazines, only they are specifically focused on history topics. There are general journals, like *The Journal of American History*, and more specific ones, like *History of Education*. Academic journals can usually be found at college and university libraries, and there are often indexes to help you find an article on a specific topic. Or just peruse some of these journals to see what kinds of questions professional historians are asking about your topic.

## **2. Getting acquainted with primary sources.**

Bibliographies located in the back of general works and the notes and bibliographies found in monographs will lead you to all kinds of interesting primary sources. Here are some basic kinds of primary sources:

### **Letters, Diaries, and Other First-person Narratives**

Diaries, letters, or reminiscences of revolutionary soldiers, political activists, or government officials could provide fascinating first-hand accounts of people's experiences with revolutions. Many diaries and collections of letters have been published, and you can find them through library catalogues or reference books such as *American Diaries*. The microform collections of major university libraries often include a series called *Early American Imprints*, which reproduces every book, pamphlet, and broadside published in America before 1820. This is a great source for first-person accounts of the American and French Revolutions, backcountry rebellions, and similar topics. The same libraries may own microfilm series with titles such as *Early English Books* or *The Eighteenth Century*, which are catalogued in *The English Short-Title Catalogue*. These reproduce all English-language works published anywhere in the world or any books, regardless of language, published in England or the English empire from 1473 to 1800. You can find many works relating to world history, since many accounts originally written in foreign languages were translated into English and published. For example, you could find many primary sources relating to the Protestant Reformation and the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Europe. Travel narratives, written by English visitors to foreign lands, also can provide insight into world history topics.

### **Manuscript/Paper Collections of Non-profit Organizations, Prominent Individuals, or Families**

These include letters, memos, reports, statements of purpose, plans for projects, deeds, wills, etc. Collections of papers of a particular organization, individual or family can be found in the holdings of state and local historical societies, churches and other organizations, or maybe in your attic. Collections of papers in historical societies are likely to be organized by subject or time period in boxes, and they often have finding aids, which are detailed guides to what's in the collection. University libraries often have special collections units which have not only university records but manuscript holdings about alumni, donors, or local families or businesses. They also typically have microfilm collections of manuscripts owned by other institutions. While not comprehensive, the online [National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections](#) is a great place to start looking for manuscripts.

### **Songs and Hymns**

For example, the United States labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left behind many songs which might be interpreted as promoting reform or revolution--you be the judge! You may find songbooks or recordings in your local public or university library. The [American Memory Project of the Library of Congress](#) also includes many songs.

### **Photographs**

There are wonderful photographs available for many revolutions from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, including photos of laborers during the industrial revolution, and photojournalism of national revolutions around the world. Photographers, such as those during the Progressive era, also took many photos which inspired reform movements. You may find pictures in books or magazines and typically historical societies and archives have photographic collections. Look at the Research Links section of the [National History Day home page](#) for links to some major online photographic collections.

### **Tools, Machines, Furniture, and Other Artifacts**

After studying some of the machines, such as conveyer belt machines, that shaped the industrial revolution, you might build a model for your History Day exhibit, and use it as part of your historical interpretation. You can find artifacts at museums, historical societies, or historic sites. You might even find something you can use at a local antique store or flea market or even in your grandparents' attic.

### **Court Proceedings**

An interesting study of a reaction in history could be developed from examination of the proceedings of the famous Scopes trial of 1925, which provides a fascinating glimpse at the reaction of many Americans to the teaching of evolution in the schools. (These proceedings were broadcast nationwide on the radio at the time!) Some court records have been printed in book form and others in newspapers. Records for local and state courts will probably be at your state archives or at the appropriate courthouse, while federal court records are available at the National Archives. Supreme Court opinions from 1893 to the present are available online at [FindLaw](#).

#### Government Records, including Census Data

Have you thought about the revolution in the American family in the second half of the twentieth century? Census records, usually available in large libraries, can tell you about changes such as the growing participation of mothers in the labor force. County-level census data from 1790 to 1970 are also available online at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>. Your state archives will have records for your state government, while the National Archives and its many branches house the records of the federal government. The National Archives and various presidential libraries have put some government records online; go to the [National Archives and Records Administration's home page](#) for more information and links. You could use these records to study not only revolution, reaction, and reform in the United States but also foreign revolutions and events through diplomatic and other government records. Colonial and state records through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century are available in a huge microfilm collection called *The Records of the States of the United States*.

#### Newspapers and Magazines

Newspaper or magazine articles from the time period you're considering often provide wonderful eyewitness accounts. Many university libraries have microfilm copies of *The New York Times*, which started publishing in 1851 and which is indexed, so you can find articles on your subject relatively easily. Public and university libraries often have microfilm copies of local and state newspapers, too. Be sure you know about what date your event occurred to help you find some good articles.

For 20<sup>th</sup>-century magazines, use the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* to find articles. For 19<sup>th</sup>-century magazines, the equivalent is something called *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature*, which is available primarily at university libraries. University and some public libraries will have microfilm of such popular magazines at *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Harper's Weekly*. Copies of thousands of issues of 19<sup>th</sup>-century magazines may be found online through the [Making of America project](#). The library of the flagship university in your state may have a microfilm collection called *American Periodical Series*, which includes all existing issues of most American magazines published in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Note: Newspapers or magazines published during the time period you are researching are primary sources. A newspaper article published in 2001 commemorating the Russian Revolution of 1917 is not a primary source.

#### Oral history interviews

An oral history interview is a focused interview with someone about his/her past and role in history. (The person needs to have been a participant in the historical event or period you are investigating; an interview with an expert on the history of the American Revolution is not a primary source but may be a very good secondary source.) You can conduct an oral history interview yourself. You might also find collections of oral histories conducted by historians. These are usually located at historical societies and archives, and sometimes online. For example, the [American Memory collection of the Library of Congress= National Digital Library](#) has a wide range of transcripts of oral histories. A good resource for students interested in using oral history is *Doing Oral History*, by Donald A. Ritchie (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

### 3. Finding the primary sources you need.

Make phone calls, send e-mail, or write to living historical figures--famous and not famous. If you've chosen a topic that took place during the past 60 years, chances are you can find someone who participated in or experienced it first-hand. Don't overlook people in your own community. There's almost certainly someone in your hometown who participated in civil rights activities, protested government actions, worked for reforms, or fought for freedom at home or abroad. Contact libraries, local, state, and national historical societies and organizations to find out about their collections. To plan your visit efficiently, take advantage of the catalogues or guides which many libraries, archives, and historical societies have made available online. You can find links to many of them from the [National History Day home page](#). Your state or city may have a unified online catalogue of all or many libraries in your area, which makes finding books easier. You can usually find out about these at the web site of your official state library (we have links from the [NHD web site](#)) or sometimes from the web sites of local public libraries. The libraries of the public universities in a state often have a unified catalogue, too; visit one of the libraries in person or check out the web sites of the individual libraries to find more information.

Visit historic sites related to your topic. In addition to getting a feel for where your event took place and getting visual images if you're doing an exhibit or documentary, take advantage of the resources at historic sites. You can usually find an expert at the site who has done a lot of research and may have or know of some great sources. And the site may have a research collection of books, manuscripts, and artifacts which you might be allowed to use. Call or write first to find out what's available and make an appointment, if necessary.

### 4. Some examples of where primary and secondary sources can be found.

School Library

A great place to start. At your own school, you will probably find:

- Encyclopedias
- History textbooks
- General historical works and monographs
- Access to the Internet

#### Public Library

You'll find a greater selection of resources here, and possibly access to excellent sources through interlibrary loan. Ask at the circulation or reference desks about interlibrary loan, which is a way to borrow books or even microfilm from libraries all over the country. At a public library, you can find:

- Additional reference books
- General historical works
- Access to the Internet
- Access to interlibrary loan
- Video documentaries
- Some historical monographs
- Historical novels (e.g., Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* could serve as a primary source in its descriptions of the industrial revolution.)
- Clipping files: newspaper and magazine accounts of local events
- Special collections of various resources
- Newspapers and magazines

#### University Libraries

Here you'll find an even wider selection, including unique collections and greater access to primary sources. You often cannot check materials out if you are not a university student, so come prepared with change for copying and notebook paper for note-taking. You can find:

- History journal articles
- General historical works and monographs
- Historical atlases (e.g., a map showing major battles in the Chinese revolution)
- Popular magazine collections (Here you can find interesting visual documentation of things like the revolution of fashion, such as the acceptability of women wearing pants, when only a few decades earlier they wore long skirts.)
- Previous studies of your topic, which may include some primary sources: (e.g., a history of the Mexican revolution might contain translated songs from that period)

#### State and Local Historical Societies and Archives

Ever wonder what's inside those buildings in your community or state capital? Go find out! It's a good idea to do some preliminary research in secondary sources first and maybe make a few phone calls or check out the institution's web site. The more specific you are about what you're looking for, the more helpful the staff of such institutions can be. Also take lots of paper for note-taking and some change for copying because the historical documents cannot be checked out. You can find:

- Manuscript Collections
- Letters and Diaries
- Papers of prominent local individuals and families
- Papers of state and local organizations such as state political parties, boards of education, and foundations
- State and local newspapers (some may be indexed by topic)
- Oral history collections
- Records of government agencies
- Records of births, marriages and deaths
- Collections of photographs
- Brochures and pamphlets
- Reports of state commissions on various subjects, such as education, commerce or crime
- Historical object collections

#### Organizations

Some organizations donate their historical records to historical societies. A few, like the Y.M.C.A., even establish their own archival collections. Many smaller organizations keep at least some of their own documents. If you're interested in the reform efforts of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (to end the sale and consumption of alcohol in the U.S.), find out if there was a local or regional chapter in your area which left behind records. Partial records of many organizations and papers of prominent individuals are now available online, a useful alternative to local records if none are available near you. Keep in mind that you will only have available selected records in most cases. In addition to using the Internet, you can call organizations that interest you to find out where their historical records are kept. You can try:

- Churches and synagogues
- Fraternal organizations
- Ethnic societies
- Political parties or other political organizations
- Corporations
- Veterans groups
- Settlement houses or other community centers
- Charities

### Your Local Video Store

No kidding! Casablanca is part of the history of the 1940s. Produced in 1943, the film is a dramatic look at wartime refugees in Morocco, and it is very revealing of Americans' perspectives on the role of the United States in the world during World War II. Popular films are one kind of "popular culture." Other examples are television and music. So you might want to look in your video store for:

- Popular films
- Documentaries (NOT docudramas of historical events)

### Art Museums

Works of art can serve as primary sources and can add a great deal to the visual dimensions of your project. Check out collections with historical significance:

- Paintings
- Sculptures
- Photographs

### All Around Your Community

History is everywhere! Look around for:

- Personal records, such as diaries and letters
- Family and household records
- Photo albums
- Home movies and videos
- Historical artifacts such as tools or furniture
- Oral history interviews you can conduct yourself
- Places with historic significance (such as monuments to Revolutionary war heroes, or the homes or public buildings such as churches used by prominent reformers.)

### National Archives and Records Administration

A HUGE collection of materials related to all facets of the federal government in the United States. You can write to the National Archives to find out about materials that might be relevant to your topic. But be sure to narrow the topic first. The more specific the questions you ask, the better chance you have of receiving a helpful reply. You can also find a very helpful online service at the [National Archives and Records Administration's web site](http://www.nara.gov/education/classrm.html). As part of their "Digital Classroom," which provides services to teachers, there is a new section just for students working on National History Day projects. Follow the user-friendly menu to home in quickly on materials that might be helpful for your specific topic.

- Digital Classroom Internet address: [www.nara.gov/education/classrm.html](http://www.nara.gov/education/classrm.html)
- General Research and National History Day Research address: <http://www.nara.gov/education/historyday/history.html>
- [Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives](http://www.nara.gov/education/historyday/history.html)
- [NARA Archival Information Locator Database](http://www.nara.gov/education/historyday/history.html)
- Mailing address: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408

### The Internet

Getting better all the time. Get connected to people, major research library catalogs and online primary sources. It's cheaper than the phone and becoming more user friendly all the time. You can find whole collections of sources, including many world history primary sources in English. By hooking up with the [National History Day home page](#), you can get connected to great online resources, including many online primary sources. Within the [National History Day home page](#) are links to:

- The National Archives and Records Administration
- The Library of Congress
- The Smithsonian Institution
- History Education Resources
- U.S. Holocaust Museum
- Colonial Williamsburg
- and others!

Great places to find primary sources online! But keep in mind that most institutions have only a tiny fraction, usually less than 2% of their records online.

#### **5. A note on finding sources on international topics:**

Many of the "hot links" on the Internet contain collections of translated sources. Many famous texts have also been translated: sacred works like the Koran, the Baghavad-gita, autobiographies of famous individuals, constitutions and works of literature. Memoirs are sometimes published in English, such as the book *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* (in China in the 1960s), by Yuan Go. The ancient writings of Plato and Aristotle are also available in translation. Meetings of heads of state and other diplomatic officials have left us documents in English. Some countries publish English-language news material for the world; these periodicals can be found in major research libraries. Also, you can look at the people whose language you don't speak through the observations of English-language speakers. For example, Christian missionaries to other countries and English-speaking soldiers, such as U.S. soldiers in Nicaragua, also left records that provide useful commentary on revolution, reaction, or reform. Oral histories of people who grew up outside the United States can be helpful for more recent decades. The United Nations has many documents in English concerning conditions in particular countries as well as documentation of diplomatic events. You can also get some international perspective on an event by reading English-language newspapers or magazines. And don't forget, English is one of the primary languages in many corners of the world. You can find English-language sources from places like India (a former colony of Great Britain) and South Africa as well as Australia, Great Britain and Ireland. Of course, if you can read another language, you can cast your net even wider into world history!

#### **6. Tackling research challenges: questions and answers.**

**Q:** *How do I find out about the experiences of people who didn't read and write, like most of the indentured servants, slaves, and 19th-century immigrants to the United States?*

**A:** This is a very common problem, since throughout most of world history, the vast majority of people were illiterate. You can find out some things about the experiences of migrants who did not leave records, though. For example, for every group of migrants--whether those people were invited to move to a place or not--there is a historical or archaeological record of how people reacted to new people and new ideas. In recent centuries, there were sometimes people assigned to simply keep track of comings and goings. Ship's records or local records-keeping agencies might have records about migrants. From examining these documents, you might find out the sex or age of a group of indentured servants coming to the American colonies, or you might discover what kinds of objects immigrants brought with them.

There were also many government or private agencies, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries, that had contact with migrants, and left records. For example, the U.S. government set up the Freedmen's Bureau right after the Civil War to assist former slaves (in general, a very mobile population!) in securing new contracts with employers as free people. In the late 19th century, urban reformers throughout the United States set up "settlement houses" in immigrant neighborhoods to advocate for immigrants and in many cases to "Americanize" them. Agencies that have offered lessons in English as a second language can provide more recent information on intercultural contact through immigration. Some of these organizations have left entire buildings full of historical records, including many observations of and reactions to new people and new ideas.

Other agencies that dealt with migrant populations include the Immigration and Naturalization Service; corporations, such as the canning industry in the Southwest, which employed many immigrants; and large unions that organized immigrant workers, like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (which joined with the American Federation of Labor to form the AFL-CIO).

**Q:** *I would like to create a media presentation by doing an oral history of my grandmother, who immigrated from Mexico. Her story is interesting, but how do I make a video that shows more than just her talking about her life?*

**A:** Interview her in her home. Have her show you (and your video camera) memorabilia from her past. Her neighborhood might make interesting video material, too. See what remnants of her past you find as you look around and talk to her. Note what she was interested in saving and what she did not care to save. If she makes reference in the interview to historic events, people, or places, complement the oral history with other kinds of sources, such as newspaper articles. You might also find slides of the places, events, or people she describes; these could complement your media presentation. Show how she is part of history.

**Q:** *I'm interested in how the movement of people around the globe generated interest in new foods, like hot spices. Where do I start looking for sources?*

**A:** Food has an interesting history, and there has been so much written on this subject lately that you might want to narrow your topic. You might try looking at some recently published cookbooks, some of which have extensive histories of certain kinds of food. Historical atlases may contain maps concerning the migration of spices around the globe. After all, those European explorers started out looking for spices, not gold. (If you lived on gruel and bread, you, too, might be ready to set sail around the globe in search of flavor!)

Also try some key word searches like "spice and history" or "food and history" on a university library catalog. You will find histories of the Dutch trade in the "spice islands," and perhaps you will run across a book about the creation of white sauce as a way to Americanize the spicy cuisine of eastern and southern European immigrants (it's called Perfection Salad). By looking at issues of popular women's magazines such as Ladies Home Journal, you might be able to document the growing use of a particular spice in the food cooked by American women. Other primary sources you might check out are newspaper articles and old cookbooks.

**Q:** *What about finding primary sources for international topics?*

**A:** Many of the "hot links" on the Internet contain collections of translated sources. Many famous texts have also been translated: sacred works like the Koran, the Baghavad-gita, autobiographies of famous individuals, constitutions, and works of literature. The ancient writings of Plato and Aristotle are also available in translation. Meetings of heads of state and other diplomatic officials have left us documents in English. Some countries publish English-language news material for the world; these periodicals can be found in major research libraries. And once again, you can look at the people whose language you don't speak through the observations of English-language speakers. For example, Christian missionaries overseas left documents of their experiences as migrants as well as their observations of people in other countries. Oral histories of people who grew up outside the United States can be helpful for more recent decades. The United Nations has many documents in English concerning conditions in particular countries as well as documentation of diplomatic events. You can also get some international perspective on an event by reading English-language newspapers. And don't forget, English is one of the primary languages in many corners of the world. You can find English-language sources from places like India (a former colony of Great Britain) and South Africa as well as Australia, Great Britain, and Ireland. Of course, if you can read another language, you can cast your net even wider into world history!

## **7. Interpreting those primary sources**

Once you find your primary sources, you have the building blocks of your History Day project. Your interpretation of the primary sources you've uncovered is your History Day project. You will develop a thesis, a main point that summarizes what you think these sources from the past say to us in the present. As you puzzle out the meaning of these sources, here are some things to keep in mind:

**Don't forget that the historical event or issue you're researching took place in a particular historical context. Be sure to review secondary material as you interpret the primary sources. This will help you think through the significance of your topic in history.**

Don't assume that your sources contain the "truth" about an event. Historians need to be skeptical about every source they find, including Internet sources. Here are some questions to ask yourself in order to determine just how much a particular source really tells you about the past:

- Why are the sources you've chosen useful for answering the questions you want answered?
- What kind of information is not revealed by the sources you have (and may never be revealed because we can never know all the details of a historical event)?
- Who is the author/producer/storyteller?
- Why did they produce this document, paint this painting, or decide to tell you their story?
- Who was the intended audience?



- What was the purpose of the letter, diary, speech, etc.?
- In what kinds of situations were those songs sung, or those farm implements used?
- What are the key biases you see in this source?
- How much can we find out about the people whose voices do not appear in a particular document, from the perspective of the people who left written information?
- Who preserved this source of historical information and why?
- Do the various primary sources you've collected give you conflicting information? Why?
- How does what you learned from one photograph complement--or contradict--what you learned from a newspaper account?
- What do you know about the larger historical context (you know, the stuff you learned about in history class!) that can help you understand the particulars you find in your primary sources?
- How might the story you're uncovering as you research this topic relate to other episodes in history?